

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Parable of the Sower

Luke 8:4-8, 11-15

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February 2, 2014

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Scripture

As Jesus was coming to the end of his Galilean ministry, which some say lasted about 16 months, he drew vast audiences to his ministry. He also experienced growing opposition to his message about the good news of the kingdom of God.

Although he had previously illustrated his preaching with a few short parables, Luke now recorded Jesus giving his first major parable, the one we know as The Parable of the Sower.

Last time we examined the purpose of the parables, which Jesus stated in Luke 8:9-10. Jesus basically said that parables illustrated various aspects of the kingdom of God for believers. But, for those who were hardened in their opposition to the good news of the kingdom of God, Jesus' parables simply confirmed their lack of understanding, hard-heartedness, and unwillingness to submit to him as Savior and Lord.

Interestingly, in the parallel section in The Gospel of Mark, Mark said that from this point on Jesus "did not speak to them without a parable" (Mark 4:34).

So, let's read The Parable of the Sower today in Luke 8:4-8, 11-15:

⁴And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, ⁵"A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. ⁸And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." ...

¹¹Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹²The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. ¹⁴And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. ¹⁵As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. (Luke 8:4-8, 11-15)

Introduction

Several years ago, in an effort to lure as many people as possible to their Easter Services, a mega-church in Corpus Christi, TX gave away flat-screen television sets, skateboards, Fender guitars, furniture, and 15 cars! And even if attendees did not win one of the big prizes, they were still likely to walk away with one of the 15,000 gift bags, each with about \$300 worth of free goods and services. The leaders were hoping to double the attendance at their Easter Services.¹

Now I don't know how many people actually attended their Easter Services. But I would be shocked if they did not have a dramatic jump in their attendance. People always want something for nothing.

In fact, that is what was happening with Jesus' ministry. Jesus ministry consisted of his message – a message about the good news of the kingdom of God – accompanied by miracles – miracles that authenticated his message.

It was now common for great crowds of people to attend Jesus' ministry. They wanted to see what miracles Jesus would

¹ See <http://abclocal.go.com/ktrk/story?section=news/state&id=7360606>.

do. So Luke said in verse 4, “**And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable**” – and then Jesus told The Parable of the Sower.

Jesus was concerned about the **great crowd**. He knew that more and more people just came for the “goodies.” They came for what they could get out of the service. They did not come to hear his message of faith and repentance. They wanted to see what was going on. They wanted to sample but not submit. Some of them had no real spiritual interest at all; they were there just out of curiosity.

In fact, there were a number of different responses to Jesus’ message. But only one response would give the hearer unimaginable blessing. So, Jesus gave them **a parable**, the parable we know as The Parable of the Sower, although it is perhaps better called The Parable of the Soils because it illustrates four different responses to the Word of God.

Lesson

A study of the responses of the different soils to the seed illustrates different responses to the Word of God.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Information in the Parable (8:5-8)
2. The Interpretation of the Parable (8:11-15)

I. **The Information in the Parable (8:5-8)**

First, let’s look at the information in the parable.

Jesus said that **a sower went out to sow his seed** (8:5a). It is possible that someone was in fact sowing seed while Jesus was teaching, and so everyone in the crowd could see him. Sowing took place in the late fall or early winter (October to December), during the rainy season, and the crop sprouted in

spring (around April or May) and was harvested around June.²

In those days a **sower** draped either over his shoulders or around his waist a strap to which a bag was attached in front of him. He would **sow his seed** by taking a handful of seed out of the bag and spread it as evenly as he could in the field. Commentators differ about the order of sowing and plowing: in Israel, often a field was plowed only after it was sown.³ That detail, however, does not affect the point of the parable.

Jesus then said that the seed fell in four different soils.

A. *Some Seed Fell Along the Path (8:5b)*

First, some seed fell along the path.

Jesus said in verse 5b, **“And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it.”**

The seed that **fell along the path** refers to the paths along which people walked that separated the narrow strips of cultivated land. Farmers used them to get to their fields, and travelers used them to get around the countryside. The paths were not plowed, and in the dry climate of Israel they would become almost as hard as a concrete sidewalk. The seed that fell along the path had no chance of penetrating the hard-packed soil. Consequently, the seed lay exposed, **and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it.**

B. *Some Seed Fell On the Rock (8:6)*

Second, some seed fell on the rock.

Jesus said in verse 6, **“And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.”**

² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 723.

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, 724.

The seed did not literally fall **on the rock**. This was not a field with many rocks, but a base of rock under the soil. In an unplowed field, such land was not easily spotted.⁴ There was insufficient moisture in the soil and the plants' roots could not reach below the rock to reach the water table beneath it. Consequently, the seed would sprout, but after a while, **it withered away, because it had no moisture.**

C. Some Seed Fell Among Thorns (8:7)

Third, some seed fell among thorns.

Jesus said in verse 7, **“And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it.”**

Even the most diligent plowing could not remove all the thorns' roots. When the seed began to grow, the thorns began to grow too. **The thorns grew up** faster and higher and stronger than the seed, **and eventually choked it.**

But the situation was not entirely hopeless.

D. Some Seed Fell Into Good Soil (8:8)

And fourth, some seed fell into good soil.

Jesus said in verse 8a, **“And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.”**

This **good soil** had none of the drawbacks of the other three soils. The **good soil** was soft and deep and free of thorns. Consequently, it produced a wonderful crop; it **yielded a hundredfold**. Normal yields ranged from sevenfold to tenfold, so that a hundredfold return was exceptional, although Genesis 26:12 does speak of Isaac's hundredfold yield.⁵

Commentator Darrell Bock makes a fascinating comment about the parable when he says,

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, 724.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, footnote 726.

It is interesting that Luke uses four prepositions to describe the different seed: *along* the path (*para*), *on* the rock (*epi*), *among* thorns (*en mesō*), and *into* good soil (*eis*). In contrast to the failure of the other seed, only the last seed penetrates the soil and achieves its goal of becoming fruitful.⁶

Well, that is the end of the parable for Jesus. But then Luke said that **as Jesus said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”** (8:8b). This is really Jesus’ point in the parable. Jesus was saying in a very simple but very profound way that citizens of his kingdom will hear, that is, they will understand and embrace what he has to say.

The disciples asked Jesus what he meant. Last time I explained verses 9-10 to you. So, now I want to move on to the interpretation of the parable.

II. The Interpretation of the Parable (8:11-15)

And second, let’s look at the interpretation of the parable.

Jesus said in verse 11, **“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.”**

Jesus first explained that **the seed is the word of God**. It is the message of the gospel. It is the good news of the kingdom of God. And although he doesn’t say it, he is the original sower of the seed. Every person who shares **the word of God** is also sowing the seed.

Jesus then showed four responses to **the word of God**.

A. *The Path Represents Hard Hearts (8:12)*

First, the path represents hard hearts.

Jesus said in verse 12, **“The ones along the path are**

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, 726.

those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”

This first group represents people who hear the word of God but they are not receptive to it. It never penetrates their minds, or touches their consciences, or enters their hearts. It just seems to go in one ear and out the other.

The problem is not in the word of God, or in the way it is presented, but it is in the hearts of the people who hear it. They may be hardened by bitter experiences in life, or an unjustified prejudice against God, or by an unwillingness to give up some sin, or by indifference to spiritual truth. Whatever the reason, God’s word never gets into their hearts and changes their lives.

But, notice that these people also have someone working against them: **the devil, who comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.** Notice also that the devil takes away the word *after* it has been heard. Do you know when Satan is most active? It is when the gospel is presented in a church that preaches the word of God. Bishop J. C. Ryle put it this way:

But nowhere perhaps is the devil so active as in a congregation of Gospel-hearers. Nowhere does he labor so hard to stop the progress of that which is good, and to prevent men and women being saved. From him come wandering thoughts and roving imaginations, – listless minds and dull memories, – sleepy eyes and fidgety nerves, weary ears and distracted attention. In all these things Satan has a great hand. People wonder where they come from, and marvel how it is that they find sermons so dull, and remember them so badly! They forget the parable of the sower. They forget the devil.⁷

Ask God to soften your hard heart so that you can take in

⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 250–251.

his word, believe it before the devil swoops in to snatch it away, and be saved.

Do you know why your loved one keeps resisting the gospel? It is because Satan actively snatches the word of God as soon as it is sown. So pray for your loved one as well.

B. The Rock Represents Shallow Hearts (8:13)

Second, the rock represents shallow hearts.

Jesus said in verse 13, **“And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.”**

This group represents those who hear the word of God and respond by making a profession of faith. They seem to be filled with joy. But it does not last long because they are not rooted. They are not grounded in the truth of God’s word and as soon as they encounter the heat of testing, they fall away.

We all know people like this. There was a time when they seemed so happy to be called a Christian, but they have fallen away from the faith. A high school student who was enthusiastic about going to youth group falls in with a bad crowd. A girl who grew up in Sunday school goes off to college and by the second semester she is sleeping with her boyfriend. A couple that went to church regularly when they were dating drift away after they get married. A man who said he wanted to grow spiritually drifts into pornography and won’t give it up. A skeptic who seemed to make a dramatic conversion to Christ moves on to another religion, or no religion at all.

Bishop J. C. Ryle had this to say about shallow hearts:

It is quite possible to feel great pleasure, or deep alarm, under the preaching of the Gospel, and yet to be utterly destitute of the grace of God. The tears of some hearers of sermons, and the extravagant delight of others, are no certain marks of

conversion. We may be warm admirers of favorite preachers, and yet remain nothing better than stony-ground hearers. Nothing should content us but a deep, humbling, self-mortifying work of the Holy Ghost, and a heart-union with Christ.⁸

C. *The Thorns Represent Divided Hearts (8:14)*

Third, the thorns represent divided hearts.

Jesus said in verse 14, **“And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.”**

Jesus mentioned three kinds of thorns: **the cares and riches and pleasures of life**. These things can keep our hearts from being fruitful. Again, this group represents people who have initially embraced the word of God but, after a time, **the cares and riches and pleasures of life** come into their lives and choke out what fruit they may have produced.

The people in this group are not believers. They are not Christians who have fallen away. Instead, they are people who make a profession of faith and *seem* to be Christians, but when **the cares and riches and pleasures of life** take prominence, they are shown to be without Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

Bishop J. C. Ryle expressed his concern for divided hearts:

The things of this life form one of the greatest dangers which beset a Christian’s path. The money, the pleasures, the daily business of the world, are so many traps to catch souls. Thousands of things, which in themselves are innocent, become, when followed to excess, little better than soul-poisons,

⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 252.

and helps to hell. Open sin is not the only thing that ruins souls. In the midst of our families, and in the pursuit of our lawful callings, we have need to be on our guard. Except we watch and pray, these temporal things may rob us of heaven, and smother every sermon we hear. We may live and die thorny-ground hearers.⁹

D. The Good Soil Represents Fruitful Hearts (8:15)

And fourth, the good soil represents fruitful hearts.

Jesus said in verse 15, **“As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.”**

Commentator Philip Graham Ryken says, “A good heart is not so hardened by sin that Satan can snatch away the good seed of God’s word. It is not so shallow that it withers in the heat of persecution. It is not so distracted that it gets choked off by life’s troubles and pleasures. Instead, it stays rooted in the word of God, and as a result, it bears a bountiful harvest.”¹⁰

Conclusion

Like Jesus’ other parables, this parable searches our hearts. This parable applies to each one of us. Ask yourself, “How am I responding to God’s word? Is my heart hard? Is it shallow? Is it divided? Or, is it fruitful?”

Usually, when people listen to the sermon, they want to evaluate it. But, according to this parable, it is really the sermon – that is, the word of God – that evaluates us because the way we respond shows what is in our hearts. Good hearing is just as important as good preaching.

So, he who has ears to hear, let him hear! Amen.

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 252–253.

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1: Chapters 1-12* in *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 365.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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To Seek and To Save the Lost

PRAYER:

Join me in quietly praying this prayer:

O God, make my heart receptive to the word of God, so that I may bear fruit in my life for your glory. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!